

Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Green, Michael (2014) Ghosting Through: Commemorating George Elliott Benson. *Hexham Historian*, 24. pp. 3-19.

Published by: Hexham Local History Society

URL:

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link:
<http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/21346/>

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University's research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html>

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher's website (a subscription may be required.)



**Northumbria
University**
NEWCASTLE



UniversityLibrary

Ghosting Through: Commemorating George Elliott Benson Michael Cawood Green

By the left, best foot forward, he strides up Beaumont Street, in uniform with riding breeches and spurs. At the intersection with Hencote and Battle Hill he freezes, right foot behind, heel up, left hand folded against his hip, right hand raising his binoculars. Bareheaded, he stares out over the sweep of his obligatory Victorian moustache, his brow and nose cut as straight and clean as in any of his pictures, the jaw a touch stronger, the cheeks less sunken, his eyes set well back in features born to be sculpted. Imperious, his body wide open to the world, his head is quarter-turned towards his family home near the village of Fourstones. But those eyes, eager, watchful, scan another landscape, wider and more open, even, than Northumberland.

In a moment his right hand will complete its arc, bringing his binoculars up to his eyes. In that instant, the sun glimmers through the murk of rain and mist to glint off the glass, and a bullet tears into that delicately poised right leg, smashing the bone just below the knee before ricocheting off into the flesh of his arm.

He falls, as all around him the veldt comes alive with Boers materialising as if by magic out of the sodden haze, crouching ghosts using their Mausers like pistols at such close range, barrels blossoming red and orange against the whiteout.

But now, in all weathers, he is forever taking that last step, forever, fatally, raising his binoculars. Upright on a stone pedestal with a gently curved dado and simple entablature, he imposes his authority on passers-by at the busiest intersection in the market town of Hexham. Mid-stride, though, he has faded into familiarity and bird droppings.

On the south face of the pedestal there is a bronze plaque, but getting close enough to read it takes some effort. The fact that someone has negotiated the staggered crossroads to the statue's hemmed-in, traffic-bound site and stepped cautiously through the flower beds around its base to reach the plaque, marks him out as someone not from here, the object of more curious glances from passing locals than the statue ever attracts. But there he is, scribbling in his notebook as he makes out the raised Roman letters:

TO THE MEMORY OF A GALLANT SOLDIER
GEORGE ELLIOTT BENSON
LIEUT.COLONEL
IN THE ROYAL REGIMENT OF ARTILLERY
WHO WAS BORN AT ALLERWASH MAY 24TH 1861
ENTERED THE ARMY MAY 9TH 1880
AND AFTER SERVING WITH DISTINCTION
IN THE SOUDAN CAMPAIGN OF 1885, 1896, 1898
IN THE ASHANTI EXPEDITION 1895
AND IN THE SOUTH AFRICA WAR 1899-1901,
FELL WHEN COMMANDING HIS COLUMN
AT THE BATTLE OF BRAKENLAAGTE OCT. 30TH 1901.

HE IS BURIED WITH THOSE WHO FOUGHT
AND DIED WITH HIM
"THE UNRETURNING BRAVE"

ERECTED BY PUBLIC SUBSCRIPTION

It is the misspelling that intrigues the note taker: *'Brakenlaagte'* makes no sense in Afrikaans, nor is there any place called *'vomit-hollow'* in South Africa. He will do his homework, of course, discover that the battle takes its name from a farm in the Eastern Transvaal, although it was fought at the intersection of a number of farms: Nooitgedacht, Kruisementfontein, Onverwacht, and *Bakenlaagte*. The final assault took place on Nooitgedacht, but for some reason it was *Bakenlaagte* that stuck, along with its misspelling.

Discovering its correct spelling doesn't really help: *Baken* – he plays with the word: 'beacon'? Little there to go with *laagte*, 'hollow' or 'low'. He finds references to a *Bakenkop* – Beacon Hill – which makes sense, but for now *Bakenlaagte* is a mystery. He is only mildly surprised to

discover months later, walking in fading light through the copse of blue gums planted by the Boers on the site it has taken him the best part of a day to locate, that there is no other monument where this last major battle of the Second Anglo-Boer War was fought. An outlandish reminder of a distasteful past, it is as foreign and invasive in the post-apartheid landscape as this tangle of weedy saplings and ghostly trunks, shining white where the bark has peeled away in long dark fingers.

There's no getting away from them in England, the markers of the first of the nation's foreign wars to haunt its landscape so prolifically. A flood of newspapers, illustrated magazines, and controversy saw to that, nowhere more so than in Northumberland, the note taker has discovered, from the massive 'shitty angel' under its flocks of pigeons outside the Haymarket Metro station in central Newcastle to many of the smallest villages. The strange names they commemorate, foreign, unpronounceable, irrelevant to the lives going on around them, produce little shocks of connection, link improbable places in a spectral web of Empire, wealth, and melodrama.

That it is Benson is just an accident. His statue happens to stand in the market town nearest to the small village where the notetaker has recently rented a house. The conjuncture of past and present, of places that measure how far he has come in that trajectory, produces an obligation of sorts, some kind of responsibility to the spirit that the monument – as monuments do – exorcizes. 'To the memory of – '? Looking around at the scurry of people dodging the first heavy drops from the black clouds that have closed in, he can see that a statue erases memory, erects history in its place.

~

As soon as news of Benson's death reached Hexham, a memorial committee and public subscription were established. When he had returned from the Nile Expedition, a hero after capturing 900 Dervishes at the battle of Atbara, the people of Newbrough and Fourstones had presented him with a silver jug and a cigar case: he was owed so much more now. A statue was decided upon – a rare honour for a field officer – but George Elliott was the youngest son of a wealthy man, and his brother William, by then head of the family, employed many men in the iron works, collieries and limekilns established by their father, Mr. William Benson, of Allerwash House.

William helped select the site, and the Glasgow-born sculptor John Tweed was an obvious choice: Heerengracht Street in Cape Town had recently been graced by his bronze statue of Van Riebeck, commissioned by Cecil John Rhodes. Rhodes insisted that his name rather than that of the sculptor's be inscribed on the plinth, but Tweed would not always be so obliging. There are those who say you can still hear the two of them arguing in the sculptor's home at 108 Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, where Tweed had a famous 'bust up' with the great man whilst sculpting his portrait. Rhodes apparently, and surprisingly, came off second best, but his influence can still be seen in the statue in Hexham: Benson's pose distinctly echoes that of the first European to settle in South Africa, commemorated on the spot where he is thought to have landed in 1652; Van Riebeck's staff is swapped for binoculars, but both have their bodies half-turned into the unknown, their eyes gazing intently into vistas to be taken in, mastered.

The committee congratulated themselves on getting the memorial for £840 instead of the £2,000 quoted, all the more so because Tweed was advised and assisted on the project by no less a figure than his old mentor, Auguste Rodin. Of course there are those who say Tweed would be better known today if, like Rodin, he had concentrated more on artistic pieces rather than memorials; instead, his reputation has faded along with the reputations of those he commemorated: Clive, Chamberlain, Anson, Disraeli, Ronaldshay, General Sir John Moore, General Sir George White, Admiral Lord Beresford, General Lord Chesham and any number for war memorials at the end of the Great War – General Smuts wanted him for the South African War Memorial in France, but this fell through – along with Captain James Cook (at both Whitby and St Kilda), Queen Victoria (in Aden and Madras), and of course Cecil John Rhodes in Salisbury and Mafeking. So many lost now in the history they made, but Benson's statue was much admired when it was unveiled by his old commander, General Lord Methuen, before a large crowd in 1904.

And art did have its say with Benson. Between them, Rodin and Tweed were able to persuade the committee that the statue, originally meant to face north towards Market Place and the Abbey, would be more aesthetically pleasing if it faced south; so positioned, the arc of the sun would fall on those sculptured features, that brave chest, the half-raised binoculars.

So that's why the south-west turn of the head is not aligned with Allerwash House, that attractive late Georgian stone building surrounded by mature trees and set in delightful farmland rolling effortlessly out to scenic moorland, just six miles north east of Hexham; instead, the note taker jots down, Benson strains to look beyond the Total Beauty Salon and H L Caris & Son, Clock Repair Specialists. Ghosting through them is a heaving sea of veldt, a grassy ground-swell of bare undulating downs with deep hollows where whole armies could disappear.

He has just dismounted after riding back from the head of his column with a squadron of Scottish Horse to take personal command of his rearguard, which is being harried by Boer snipers appearing and disappearing into the low cloud on the surrounding hills. Benson and his scanty line of 180 men are squinting into a fierce squall driven by a high southerly wind – the demands of art, ignoring the rain, have at least swung his statue around to the correct compass point – when they see, saw through a rift of the clouds, a large body of horsemen in extended order galloping out of the blur of the sky-line. 'There's miles of them, begob!' cries an Irish trooper, then the curtain closes again. For a minute or more they can see nothing, hear only the drumming of the rain. Benson is unprepared for this; he only knows of one other occasion, Vlaktefontein, when the Boers attacked in something like a cavalry charge. The squall eases for an instant, but the violence of the rain has raised a thick steam from the ground, still making it impossible for him to see for any distance. And then the mist is torn apart into flying ribbons as the mounted men burst through, brandishing their rifles and firing from the saddle. Yelling and whooping, they gallop over the low, ant-heap-dotted grass, two thousand burghers pounding the earth in a front a mile and a half long. To this day the old people of the eastern Transvaal say, when a rumble of thunder sets their coffee cups rattling, 'the Boers are charging at Bakenlaagte.'

Less than thirty yards from Benson's line the burghers fling themselves off their ponies and begin shooting in earnest. The soldiers attempt to fire back, but are enveloped in a tempest of lead discharged at them from point blank range. Benson is trying to get some sense of the overall situation; he raises his binoculars to the hazy ridge beyond and his right leg gives way beneath him. He falls amongst the men falling all around him. The air is a hissing sleet of bullets, the fire so intense that all the dead will be found with multiple bullet wounds. Benson is hit again in the arm, but official reports say he was still to be seen 'crawling from point to point in the firing line encouraging all around him with a splendid example of coolness and courage'. His main concern is for the two 15-pounder field-guns he sent to cover the rearguard. The gunners only manage to fire three rounds of case before every one of them is cut down. The limbers are called for, but the instant they top the skyline of the ridge the drivers and teams are dropped in their tracks. Even now Benson can see a Boer throwing himself on one of the guns and screaming, 'Hoera, dis my kanon!'

But it is Benson himself the Boers are after. He is infamous for leading his mounted men on night marches of anywhere up to fifty miles, and bursting out of the dawn on the Boers still asleep in their laagers. And he also comes striding into the present trailing the past like the smoke which the Boers used to track his progress as he burned their homesteads, rounded up old people, women, and children for the concentration camps, confiscated crops, fodder, and vehicles, smashed ovens and mills, and maimed cattle and sheep, leaving them to die of hunger and thirst. 'Ordinary clearing work,' it was called – Rensburghoop, Witbank, Kafferstat, all left behind in flames, the smoke from the destroyed homes rising high into the air, the route of his column drawn upon the sky. 'My adjutant and I watched this all day,' wrote Commandant Grobler of the Bethel Commando shortly before Bakenlaagte; 'it was shameful and we will still settle with Benson'.

Soon the British gun position is seething with screaming horses, rifle fire and the moans of the dying and wounded. Benson calls for a volunteer to take a message to the camp ordering the artillery to fire shrapnel at the guns, right where he lay; they were to fire without regard for

him and those near him, with the one object of clearing the Boers away from the guns. Trooper Grierson gets up to take the message and is immediately struck in the foot. The bullet deflects off bone and hits Benson in the stomach. He crumples against an anthill and stares dully at the Boers advancing five deep over his line, firing at everything that moves. He sees a dazed soldier stripped to his shirt by looters and beckons him over, giving him the order for the camp and adding that no ambulances are to be sent to the hill, as the Boers will use them for cover to take the guns.

Benson sees a veldkornet¹ chase down a Tommie, throw his coat over his head and force him around so that he can cut his throat with a penknife. He sees his Assistant Staff Officer, Captain Lloyd, arrive on the ridge from the safety of the camp; his horse and the man to whom he throws the reins fall instantly dead beside him, and a bullet breaks his wrist, but he thrust his arm into his coat and saunters, upright and smiling, towards his commander, and then disappears in a whirlwind of bullets. He sees old grey-headed Squadron-Quartermaster-Sergeant Warnock dragging boxes of ammunition with two young Troopers, and when they fall, grabbing a rifle and firing right and left in the very thick of the Boers, until three bullets throw him backwards. He sees Corporal Atkin, shot down with all his comrades at one of the guns, still trying to twist the breech-block out when a bullet passes right through his upraised hands. He sees his dear friend Eustace Guinness, a Colonel in the Artillery like himself whose wedding he had attended barely three years ago in a lovely little Northumberland village, hit by a murderous rain of fire as he tries to load one of the guns on his own, his dead crew strewn about him. He sees Lance-Corporal Bell, the last unwounded man at the guns, answering the Boers' call to him to surrender by raising his rifle and dying for it. He sees every officer and man of the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry killed where they lay, each still perfectly in his proper place in the firing line.

He watches the ragged Boers stripping the British dead of their hats, coats, trousers, boots, and socks, leaving them in their shirts and drawers only. A wounded young private lying near him cries as he is robbed of his wool tunic, fifteen shillings, and a metal watch. Lieutenant Bircham dies screaming as his shattered leg is wrenched clean round whilst his spurs are being removed. Benson feels hands fumbling over him, and then is vaguely aware of someone ordering the looters to leave him alone. He assumes his rank is saving him from being robbed, but he has no idea that he is being saved from worse by his dead friend, Colonel Guinness; the Boers, one of whom he can see tugging Guinness out of his uniform like a broken mannequin, have assumed that this Colonel of the Royal Regiment of Artillery is Colonel Benson, and they have now settled with him. Guinness was a tall and powerfully built man, and now a short little Boer is pulling on his uniform, his compatriots laughing and calling out, 'Piet, Piet, jy lyk baie koddig in daardie groot Kolonel se uniform.'²

Benson's defeat is complete. He can hardly move, and keeps slipping in and out of consciousness. In one instant he jerks awake, a sudden sense of urgency infusing him. He peers around, sees the figure in authority still standing near him. With his usable hand, he feels about in the bloodstained grass for his pistol, finds only his binoculars. He raises his arm, calls over the Boer officer; he grabs his hand when he comes over, tries to look in his face. 'You must take a message to Commandant Grobler', he says, letting the rainwater on his face moisten his mouth. 'Tell him he must come to me.'

Just then Shrapnel and Vickers-Maxim shells begin bursting fiercely overhead; the near-naked trooper must have got through. Benson sees his wounded men cheering under the explosions raining death upon them and the fleeing enemy alike. The Boers are driven back, but they keep firing whenever any of the wounded move. He hears the smack of bullets into flesh, sees blood erupt anew from those clinging to the earth all around him.

He allows himself to close his eyes, fade away. He opens them again, awoken by the strange silence that has fallen; the guns and rifles have stopped. In the twilight he sees that this is because an ambulance is rolling up onto the hill. Major Wool-Sampson must have taken it upon himself to disobey his commander's orders; no doubt he thought enough had been sacrificed for honour. But the Boers use this opportunity exactly as Benson had suspected they would, running up to the guns and swinging them around to fire a few shells into the main

¹ Boer officer equivalent to lieutenant

² "Pete, Pete, you look very funny in that great Colonel's uniform."

column. They stop when they realize that their women and children, rounded up for the concentration camps, are being held in amongst the khakis. But the guns are dragged away.

With darkness came a thunderstorm, and the ambulance crew stumble about in the occasional glare of the lightening, soaked to the skin and feeling their way amongst the bodies scattered about where they fell. Benson's body is numb, distant, as he is lifted into the ambulance, but his mind is light and clear. From the back of the wagon he sees, silhouetted against the dull glow of the skyline, three men on horseback, Boer commanders watching the clearing up in the fitful truce now reigning. His binoculars are gone, but he lifts the flap of his tunic pocket awkwardly with his left hand, pulling out his papers. He sends the Doctor to ask if one of the mounted men is Commandant Grobler.

It is between eight and nine that night when Benson is brought off the field. He says little, other than transferring command to Wools-Sampson. Then he lies quietly, staring out through the large dilapidated doors of the wagon house in which he lies with the wounded who have been brought in until he sees the first clear dawn in days leach into a pale sky. The Boers, like the mist, have melted away, and for a moment he is frustrated: this is his preferred hour of attack. By six o'clock it is bright, and his eyes glaze. Captain Boyle bends over him; 'No more night marches,' Benson says, his voice then dying away into the crisp, cool Highveld air. From these last murmurs Boyle construes, 'it is all day now; Good-bye. God bless.' For the record, then, these are Benson's last words.

He is buried, not with the majority of the 'unreturned brave' in the mass grave dug on the battle site, but in the family burial ground near the wagon house on Nooitgedacht farm. His grave is only two and a half feet deep, as if in expectation of his being raised once more, its rough wooden cross replaced a few years later with a granite one erected 'In Memory of Colonel George Elliott Benson R.A. of Five Stones, Allerwash, Northumberland.'

'Brakenlaagte?' 'Five Stones?' – a mistake to each continent, the note taker jots down, with Benson rising up in bronze from his shallow grave somewhere between the two, forever pacing out the distance between them.

Where does that leave the note taker? He steps back, looks again at the raised bronze lettering on the south face of the plinth: above the inscription is the emblem of the Royal Artillery, with its motto in a banner beneath the crest of crown and gun.

UBIQUE / QUO FAS ET GLORIA DUCUNT

He knows his Kipling, knows that for the Gunner of his poem right and glory lead not only everywhere but to doing everything as well.

Everywhere? On his last visit to what he still occasionally thinks of as home, the farmer who generously walks him over the battle site tells him that the old people in the area use 'baken laagte' to refer to a place where the high-altitude grassland meets the low-altitude plains dotted by dense clusters of trees and shrubs – that uncertain, unsettling zone between Highveld and Lowveld, where one is at home in both and in neither.

Of course: *af te baken*, 'delineate' – indicate the exact position of a border or boundary. Its other meaning in English will not ghost through the Afrikaans, but suddenly now, with the name floating free of its bronze lettering, he understands: this is where he is living now, somewhere in the space measured by Benson's last step, spanning continents, histories, homes. 'An' when you've found out all it means I'll tell you 'alf the rest' – surely here is something he must, for all its shifting, slipping, and blurring, the vagueness, the half thought through intentions, the unanticipated consequences, try to clear up, work through, put down as precisely as he can.

Benson had been doomed for weeks, ever since Piet Jooste, a Boer scout, had hung high in the air on a telegraph pole somewhere between Middelburg and Pretoria, gripping with bare feet, his worn veldskoens lying in the dust below, his backside exposed while his shirt tails flapped and his comrades laughed, but holding his 'vibrator' firmly to the line, tapping into the discussion between Benson and Kitchener in which Benson indicated that he would be

moving his No 3 Column, currently resting and refitting in Middelburg after 'clearing up' the Carolina area, in the direction of Bethel on 20 October. This was reported directly to General Louis Botha.

Soon after the No 3 column left Middleberg, it was as if it had entered some kind of strange, shifting, haunted zone. At first it was business as usual: this was the guerrilla phase of the war, the big set-piece battles over with. The commandos have been split into small groups and sent back to their own districts, engaging only in surprise attacks when the opportunity arose, and then disappearing back into the vastness of the veld. Benson's tactic of using his light horseman to undertake night marches followed by dawn raids has been developed precisely to take on this sort of enemy, and within a few days he has surprised a Boer laager near Trichardsfontein, securing 37 prisoners with very little trouble. There is not even the usual gallop after half-dressed men scrambling from the wreckage of their breakfast on foot or horseback. The prisoners seem strangely self-assured, although they will say nothing and their faces remain impassive, as blank and unreadable as the veld.

The column continues over difficult terrain in poor weather, but then the heavens really opened, and the rain came down in sheets. It thundered, it poured, it blew, and heavy mists rose up all around them. Hail stones as big as racquet balls fell, the tents were flattened in the camp, over a 100 horses bolted. The native scouts and informers they usually relied upon were sullen and hostile, giving no information, or worse, deliberately misleading directions as to where they had seen the Boers. Then small bands of Boers began attacking out of the thick white fog, withdrawing back into it, attacking again, keeping up a running fight with the rearguard. No one could keep track of where they were in the heaving sea of the veldt. Riders were seen emerging from and then disappearing over the skyline to the west, then they seemed to be gathering on high ground to the south. Sometimes they appeared to be dressed in British uniforms, giving rise to rumours of cowardice and trickery but also undermining confidence in one's comrades. The Boers' khaki clothing and slouched hats with plumes looked very much like the uniforms worn by the Scottish Horse, and the rags of mist and fog increased the chances of confusion. On a number of occasions troops rode into the arms of friends only to be gunned down. The Boers seemed to be gathering in numbers too, and were never far from the wagons, which were strung out and moving ponderously in a long, single line. Benson was forced to call a halt to his infamous night marches, concentrating on defending the column instead. The veld rolled around them in huge, soft curves, offering no shelter or positions for defence, but provided endless cover for those approaching secretly or gathering for an assault. The ground was already the enemy's ally, and now the weather turned it to maximum advantage. Sniper's muzzles flared in the streaks of rain, apparently independent of the sound of the shot which was caught up and swept away in the wind. The mist itself seemed to swirl into concentrations of fighting men, snapping continuously at the heels of the column and slowing its mud-encumbered progress to a somnambulistic shuffle. Benson was directing operations when, in a bizarre, dreamlike moment, a small party of Boers opened fire out of the mist. Fifty rounds of magazine fire sang past the Colonel and his staff in as many seconds, cutting through clothes, saddles, and putties. Not a single officer was untouched, but only one sustained an actual wound. There was no comfort in this miracle; no shooter had been seen, and return fire disappeared into the blank void of the mist, as empty again as it had been, apparently, moments before. They could not shake the feeling that the veld was swarming with Boers, but the scouts could find no evidence of any concentration greater than the usual raiding parties.

As the column approached Bakenlaagte, the behaviour of its adversaries grew even more bewildering. When Benson's advance guard approached the farm, it found the Boers already there. But to the surprise of the whole unit, they simply melted away, vanishing like ghosts into the fog-distorted hills and hollows. Benson's trusted Intelligence Officer and chief scout, Lieutenant-Colonel Wools Sampson, knew the land and its people well and could usually track and navigate under any conditions, by night as well as by day, but even he now seemed on edge, suspicious, apprehensive. His talk of apparently gathering numbers and mysterious tactics was unnerving, and he seemed to have lost his instinct for feeling the very pulse of his opponents. All he could advise was that Benson look to his rearguard, now far behind as it covered the straggling wagons, while he led the convoy forward into the homestead so strangely evacuated.

And then came the messages, increasingly urgent, about the wagons. The rain had turned the veldt into an impassable bog, and every vehicle in the column had to be manhandled across a wide depression between the last ridge they had crossed and the climb up another into Nooitgedacht. At its centre was the Dwars-in-die-weg Spruit, a drift with steep banks and a boggy bottom; just as the vanguard was cautiously entering the farm, the rearguard, now some three miles behind, were watching over the last two wagons, as men and officers and steaming oxen and mules attempted to haul them out of the churned-up mud of the drift.

The sound of increasingly heavy firing gives added urgency to the messages. Benson posts two of his guns on a swell of ground that overlooks the depression about a mile and a half behind the rearguard and calls up two undermanned squadrons of his trusted Scottish Horse, the light, fast colonials so essential to the effectiveness of his night raids. He has never lost a wagon to the enemy, and is determined to take personal control of the situation. The rain comes down in heavier and heavier floods, the wind howling and driving the downpour directly into the faces of his men as they negotiate the wide, shallow descent towards the rearguard.

The wagons have already been abandoned, the Boers closing in behind the screen of the elements, the rearguard, mauled in the mist by an invisible enemy, are falling back towards Bakenlaagte. At first Benson is disapproving; it is, after all, the officers' mess that is in these wagons. Hustling a rearguard into camp with extra vigour is a common Boer tactic, only to be expected with the added advantage of the wind and the weather. As he reaches the rearguard, however, he is forced to admit that the firing is unusually heavy. Even when he gives the order to retire to the next natural line of defence – the hill where the guns are placed – he does not understand.

He assumes still that it is Commandant Grobler with his Bethel Commando harassing him, as he has been doing for the last ten days. The strengthening of numbers he puts down to the possibility of the Middleburg Commando joining Grobler, along with whatever other rag-tag remainders there are scuttling through the scorched earth of the column's route. He knows Commandant-General Louis Botha is withdrawing from a frustrated attempt at invading Natal with a force of around 2000 men, but they are much further to the south.

Everywhere on their retreat the Boers, already angry, and despondent, have come across the effects of Benson's night raids and clearing operations, finding their crops burnt, their farm houses razed to the ground, their families rounded up and sent to concentration camps. Reduced to foraging for food on the open veld, they are also hungry. The veld must be rid of Benson's column, General Botha wrote to his commandants, ordering them to keep their guerrilla bands together to form as large an attack force as possible. The camp must be watched and the English 'kept in their holes' until he is able to reinforce the commandos with his army.

Botha is seventy miles from Bakenlaagte when he is informed of Benson's vulnerable position. He sets off immediately with the remains of his invasion force, some 800 men, and a few women it seems. His march is so rapid, thoroughly screened, and accurately timed that no hint of his movements reaches British ears. To evade discovery by Wools-Sampson's scouts, Botha covered the last thirty miles at a stretch hidden by the sodden blanket of bad weather lying over the crumpled folds of the veld, and joins Grobler less than an hour before Benson crests the ridge and decides to abandon the wagons, still thinking he is dealing with a few hundred men from the Bethel Commando.

Botha sees his opening the moment Benson orders the retreat. Instantly he launches upon the small band of retiring troops a double crescent of twelve hundred thundering, firing, whooping horsemen.

The Boers are charging at Bakenlaagte. In disbelief, Benson raises his binoculars.

~

The battle of Bakenlaagte was the last major battle in the Eastern Transvaal. Several smaller skirmishes took place after that, but none of them had any effect on the outcome of the war. The British soldiers killed on Gun Hill were buried the next day a few yards from where they fell. This was a tired and hasty business. The troops had spent the whole night preparing miles of earthworks in expectation of a dawn attack, every officer and man standing to arms in the pouring rain. Before daylight the trenches were three feet deep with water, but the troopers

had to remain in them, besieged and on half rations. As the day broke, the ambulance went out under the White flag to bring in the wounded they had not been able to reach the day before and who had laid on the veldt in the rain all the night. With them went the burial party. There were seventy three bodies lying scattered amongst the teams of killed gun horses. The thirty officers and men of the Scottish Horse were put in a single grave, forty foot long, seven wide, three deep, laid in three rows, with a blanket laid across. Sixteen other bodies were brought in from the surrounding area and buried, some in less than eight inches of soil, neatly in a single row. Colonel Guinness' grave stood alone on the battlefield, to the side of the mass graves.

Eleven other severely wounded who died in the makeshift wagon house hospital are buried in the camp, although not in the family graveyard along with Benson and Lloyd. In his letter of condolence to Benson's brother, Captain Boyle writes, *'He was buried at noon, in the camp under a willow tree. I read the burial service and a wooden cross was placed over the grave, some photos were taken of it & I will see you are sent a copy.'*

It is just as well the photographs are taken; within barely three months all the markers have either been destroyed or removed. Will tracks the photograph down back in Northumberland, sees a pretty rough cross wreath with the most basic of inscriptions, *'In memory of ... died of wounds received in action... Gone But Not Forgotten...'* The sentimental touch of the willow tree is offset by the fact, not shared with the family, that Benson is buried barely two and a half feet in the ground. Wools Sampson's scouts were still out trying to ascertain if the Boers really had retired, and the reinforcements dispatched to the column by a worried Lord Kitchener had not yet arrived.

It was the Boers who returned to plant the blue gum trees in a square around the mass British graves.